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The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button

2008

- 2 HR 47 MIN
- PG-13
- 70 METAScore



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REVIEWED BY JASON BUCHANAN

Rating:

Think back a bit. How many times have you heard an old man spout that time-honored cliché, "If I knew then what I know now, things would have been a lot different growing up." In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a man has the extremely rare opportunity to do just that. Adapted from author F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story by director David Fincher and Oscar-winning screenwriter Eric Roth (*Munich*, *Forrest Gump*), the film allows us to take two journeys simultaneously -- one physical, and the other psychological. At its core, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is an inventive and involving mortality fantasy that isn't as much about the eponymous protagonist as it is about the people he meets along the way in life, and the profound effect they can have on his existence and world view -- even if their names tend to escape him from time to time.

Benjamin Button came into this world with the body of an old man, but the spirit of a newborn child. Raised in a retirement home after being abandoned by his father, the grandfatherly boy always assumed he was just another resident like all the rest -- until the day he met the lovely Daisy. And while initial appearances may have suggested that Daisy was merely coming into this world while Benjamin was surely on his way out, the truth is that this remarkable pair was on a most curious collision course. Later, as the old man grows into a young lad and ventures out into the world aboard a rickety tugboat piloted by crusty but kindly Captain Mike (Jared Harris), he finally starts to realize what living is all about. We experience Benjamin's life through not only the entries he has made in his diary, but the fading recollections of Daisy, who now lays dying in a New Orleans hospital as Hurricane Katrina begins to shake the skies above. As a result, we start to understand how Benjamin's unique circumstances afforded him the opportunity to view life from a perspective that most people dream about, but no one ever lives.

Director Fincher is more than up to the task of following Benjamin as he learns about life -- and women -- while working in a Russian port during World War II and becomes embroiled in a battle at sea after the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, and screenwriter Roth does a fantastic job of showing how Button's many experiences enriched his life while simultaneously giving him a profound appreciation for the human condition -- and the love of a beautiful woman. Together, Fincher's and Roth's talents yield a fable that wrestles with some pretty weighty concepts, but still has something for everyone.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is brimming with intriguing concepts and brilliant visual effects, making it a stimulating treat for both the eyes and the intellect. Perhaps it's a small miracle that Fincher never lets the story get so heady that it becomes adrift within its own elaborate, time-shifting universe and loses sight of the human drama that drives it, but then again, the story wouldn't be nearly as affecting without the many characters that guide our protagonist along the way. There's nary a moment that Brad Pitt isn't entirely believable as the humble traveler at the center of the film -- whether he's hobbling along as an adolescent septuagenarian early on, or turning up as a fresh-faced teen later in life. The chemistry he shares with co-star Cate Blanchett radiates through the masterful special-effects makeup and digital manipulation that they both don at various points in the film, and when Benjamin and Daisy both meet halfway in life, it's a joy to see them interact in their "natural" skins. Supporting players Harris, Taraji P. Henson, Jason Flemyng, and Tilda Swinton are all a pleasure to watch as well, and newcomer Rampai Mohadi makes a hearty impression with his brief role as a jovial Pygmy

who gives Button his first taste of freedom.

As a director, the last thing David Fincher could be accused of is excessive sentimentality. Yet in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, we begin to see a side of Fincher that wasn't afforded to us in such cool-to-the-touch classics as *Seven* and *Fight Club*. So has one of modern cinema's great cynics gone soft? In a sense, yes -- at least this time out. But while some jaded cinemaphiles might make the case that Fincher has lost his creative edge only because he isn't shredding consumerism or damning conformity outright, who's to say that force can't be equally as effective when turned in the opposite direction? After all, wasn't Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amelie* every bit as intoxicating and spirited as his dreamily dark feature debut, *Delicatessen*, or the frightfully bizarre *City of Lost Children*? Just like everyone else, filmmakers are people who change with time. Sometimes that change involves moving in a direction that may surprise fans; sometimes, sadly, it means losing their creative spark. Have no fear -- Fincher still has his spark. The only difference from before is that this time the spark serves to illuminate, rather than burn.



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